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'Not a Hero Story': Challenging Concepts of 'Heroes' and 'Villains' in Historical Conflicts through Video Games

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ABSTRACT

History has been a popular subject for video games for many years, however engagement has largely overlooked the perspectives of groups characterised as 'villains' in the historical narrative. This article explores significant factors for this under-representation in historical games and examines the interactions of two games – Battlefield V (2018) and The Great War: Western Front (2023) – with historical groups characterised by popular history as 'villains'. By contextualising each game within the respective media historiographies of the two World Wars, this article illustrates the challenges faced by video games attempting to engage with history outside of traditional 'heroic' narratives.

Introduction

Modern entertainment media platforms, such as cinema, television streaming services, and, in more recent decades, video games, have popularised and promoted a simplified perspective of history, with clear 'heroes' and 'villains' to facilitate the presentation of their narratives for their audiences and the interpretation of particular historical periods. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in entertainment media's treatment of the Germans in the Second World War, whose devolution into a homogenised villainous archetype has been represented by countless generic, one-dimensional Nazi/German characters in depictions as diverse as situation-comedies like *'Allo 'Allo* (1982-1992), action-adventure films like *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989), and video games such as the *Wolfenstein* (1981-2019) and *Sniper Elite* series (2005-2022).¹

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¹Eva Kingsepp, 'Experiencing and Performing Memory: Second World War videogames as a practice of remembrance', in Patrick Finney (ed.), *Remembering the Second World War*, (New York: Routledge, 2018), p. 219; *'Allo 'Allo*, created by Jeremy Lloyd and
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The generals of the First World War have experienced similar ‘villainous’ devolution in the popular historical narrative, reduced to caricatures of their historical counterparts through depictions in entertainment media, notably by comedies like *Blackadder Goes Forth* (1989).² However, particularly in recent years, we have also seen films, television programmes and video games engaging with historical narratives and characters in more nuanced manners – such as the recent film *The Zone Of Interest* (2023), which depicts the caring family life of the commandant of the Auschwitz concentration camp – which have sometimes challenged the inherently ‘villainous’ characterisation of figures or groups in the historical record.³

Video games have contributed significantly to the presentation of historical conflicts in entertainment media. Warfare provides many elements fundamental to gaming as a medium: competition between opposing sides, providing challenging scenarios in an accessible context; clear protagonists and antagonists; simple and nuanced narratives, and so on. Unfortunately, it is easy to dismiss the contribution of video games to contemporary understandings of warfare or of history. Many allegedly historical games feature multitudes of inaccuracies and anachronisms in spite of fervent claims to intensive research and ‘historical authenticity’, while others twist historical settings into fictional worlds more influenced by popular culture than by real events.⁴ Furthermore, formal discussion of video games frequently demands information only accessible from informal sources, primarily journalistic articles – whose lack of scholarly rigour can greatly limit the reliability or detail of their information – and gaming para-texts, such as promotional media – which require additional interpretation to extract useful commentary.⁵

David Croft, broadcast 30 December 1982 – 14 December 1992 on BBC1, DVD; *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, directed by Stephen Spielberg (1989, Paramount Pictures; DVD); *Wolfenstein* (Muse Software et al., 1981 – 2019). Published by Bethesda Softworks et al., PC, Xbox, and PlayStation; *Sniper Elite* (Rebellion Developments, 2005 - 2022). PC, Xbox, and PlayStation.

²*Blackadder Goes Forth*, written by Richard Curtis and Ben Elton, broadcast 28 September 1989 - 2 November 1989 on BBC1, DVD; Emma Hanna, *The Great War on the Small Screen: Representing the First World War in Contemporary Britain*, (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2013), pp. 89-94.

³*The Zone Of Interest*, directed by Jonathan Glazer (2023, A24 and Gutek Film; theatres).

⁴Jerome de Groot, *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Popular Culture* (Second edition), (London: Routledge, 2016), pp.153-154; Esther Wright, *Rockstar Games and American History: Promotional Materials and the Construction of Authenticity*, (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenburg, 2022), pp. 18-22.

⁵Wright, *Rockstar Games and American History*, pp. 7-10.

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However, dismissing video games as a historical medium ignores the many successes of games in enabling their players to experience history first-hand and connect emotively with historical subject material through a readily accessible format.⁶ By forcing their participants to personally engage and empathise with events on screen, video games have been at the forefront of recent historiographical trends, evoking discussion and controversy in equal measure.⁷ Moreover, as the likes of *Dad's Army* (1968-1977) has shown, depictions of history in entertainment media, especially those that seamlessly inter-weave reality and fictional interpretations of events, can have a powerful influence over the popular memory of their historical subjects.⁸ Likewise, the variety of historical games should be examined to understand how history is understood and employed in the popular zeitgeist, thereby allowing us to gauge the value of cultural currency attributed to concepts such as 'historical accuracy', and linguistic iterations thereof, in both academic and popular discourse, and to identify alternative avenues for historical games in academic discussion.⁹ In the last decade, historical game studies has grown exponentially as an academic discipline, led by authors such as Adam Chapman, Robert Houghton and Esther Wright, and now stands on the threshold of a promising future as video games continue to gain acceptance within academic study of representations of the past.¹⁰

⁶de Groot, *Consuming History*, pp.152-159; Chris Kempshall, *The First World War in Computer Games*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Pivot, 2015), pp. 7-8; Connie Veugen, "Using Games to Mediate History", in Linde Egberts and Koos Bosma (eds.), *Companion to European Heritage Revivals*, (New York: Springer International Publishing, 2014), pp. 95-99.

⁷de Groot, *Consuming History*, pp.152-159; Adam Chapman and Jonas Linderorth, "Exploring the Limits of Play: A Case Study of Representations of Nazism in Games" in Torill Elvira Mortensen, Jonas Linderorth, and Ashley ML Brown (eds.), *The Dark Side of Play: Controversial Issues in Playful Environments*, (New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 137-140.

⁸Mark Connelly, *We Can Take It!: Britain and the Memory of the Second World War*, (Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd., 2004), pp. 76-84; Corinna Peniston-Bird, "'I wondered who'd be the first to spot that': *Dad's Army* at war, in the media and in memory", *Media History*, vol. 13: 2-3 (2007), pp. 183-202; Penny Summerfield & Corinna Peniston-Bird, *Contesting Home Defence: Men, Women & The Home Guard in the Second World War*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), pp. 170-197.

⁹Wright, *Rockstar Games and American History*, pp. 18-26.

¹⁰For examples, see Adam Chapman, *Digital Games as History: How Videogames Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice*, (New York: Routledge Press, 2016); Robert Houghton (ed.), *Playing the Middle Ages: Pitfalls and Potential in Modern Games*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023); John Wills & Esther Wright (eds.), *Red Dead Redemption: History, Myth and Violence in the Video Game West*, (Norman, Ok.: University of Oklahoma Press, 2023).

This article examines the capacity of video games to challenge popular ideas of history by exploring two instances of the presentation of ‘villains’ in historical war-set games and the manner of the interactions of these games with their respective ‘historical villains’. This, in turn, shall enable the identification of challenges in analysing video games as a historical medium. In the first instance, this article examines an obvious characterisation of a ‘historical villain’ in the depiction of Nazi Germany in the First World War, and how *Battlefield V* (2018) makes a bold attempt to diversify the narrative presentation of the Germans in Second World War-set media. In the second example of ‘historical villains’ within games, we shall assess *The Great War: The Western Front* (2023) to examine how the game interacts with the ‘lions led by donkeys’ myth that continues to colour popular understandings of the First World War.¹¹ In order to highlight the impact of these chosen games on the depiction of their respective ‘historical villains’, each selected game shall be contextualised within their respective media historiographies, thereby providing illustrative examples from film and television against which to compare these games and assess how they differ or conform to the popular narrative of their particular historical conflict. This analysis will ultimately highlight the creative desire to portray history faithfully within the gaming medium, but that popular understandings of historical events can constrict the gaming medium’s ability to directly confront and redefine controversial perspectives of history as a result of interactions between games and politicised memories of the past.

Constructing ‘Villainy’ in Historical Games

Before examining specific instances of ‘historical villains’ in video games, it is important to begin by exploring what a ‘villain’ is in a gaming context. In their most common form, the video game ‘villain’ is the narrative antagonist whom the player must overcome in order to complete the game. However, there are also a multitude of games with more ambiguous ‘villains’, with nuanced or even sympathetic motivations, or even instances whereby the player character themselves can become, or be interpreted as, the true ‘villain’ either due to the writing of the in-game narrative or ‘morality mechanics’, such as the ‘Honor system’ in *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018); these mechanics attribute numerical values to certain in-game actions, and the accumulation of these values raises or lowers the player’s position on a graphical scale whose extremes represent ‘good’ and ‘bad’, and can be tied to mechanical modifiers which alter the game experience depending on the player’s position on the ‘moral’ scale.¹²

¹¹‘Lions led by donkeys’ is the colloquial name of a cultural narrative of the First World War which maintains that the soldiers in the trenches suffered horrendous casualties due to the mistakes and/or incompetence of their commanding officers.

¹²*Red Dead Redemption 2* (Rockstar Games, 2018). Xbox, PlayStation, PC; Wills & Wright (eds.), *Red Dead Redemption: History, Myth and Violence*, p. 3; Hilary Jane Locke, “You Are A True Progressive: *Red Dead Redemption 2* and the Depiction and

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Many video games follow the pattern of established historical narratives and existing media, presenting the player protagonist as the 'hero' within the given historical narrative, in direct structural conflict with a 'villain' who they must ultimately defeat. This may be viewed as a symptom of gaming's approach to historical research, which often presents a direct, simplistic interpretation of the narrative from contemporary sources.¹³ The clearest example of historical games following an established 'heroic' perspective is in the case of games with a Second World War setting. As in other entertainment media like films, this war has frequently been represented in video games; in a quantitative survey of historical games, Yannick Rochat revealed that more than 515 games with this setting were released between 1981 and 2015.¹⁴ In a significant proportion of these games – including the *Medal of Honor* (1999 - 2020), *Call of Duty* (2003 - 2023), and *Sniper Elite* (2005 - 2022) franchises – the player is cast as an Allied (usually American) soldier, thereby perpetuating an image of the Second World War as 'a "mythical 'just war'"' against the villainous Nazis 'in which good and evil are easily distinguishable, and the latter can be destroyed without guilt'.¹⁵ The Western-centric narrative in gaming's depiction of the war also builds on media precedent, whereby games overtly attempt to recreate sequences from famous films like *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), or *Enemy at the Gates* (2001) in the case of games presenting a rarer Soviet perspective.¹⁶ Another factor, of equal significance with regards to video game historiography yet often dismissed as a crude indicator of gaming's overall significance, is the commercial value of the gaming medium and, consequently, the influence of commercial imperatives upon game design.¹⁷ America is the highest valued gaming market in the world, and the home to almost half of all professional game developers globally; accordingly, the American gaming industry exerts a powerful influence over the genres and settings of many video games as a consequence of the need to appeal to this valuable market.¹⁸

Reception of Progressive Era Politics", *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, vol. 20:1 (2021), pp. 79-83.

¹³Jeremiah McCall, "The Historical Problem Space: Games as a Historical Medium", *The International Journal of Computer Game Research*, vol. 20: 3 (2020). Consulted online: <https://gamestudies.org/2003/articles/mccall>. Accessed 14 December 2023.

¹⁴Yannick Rochat, "A Quantitative Study of Historical Video Games (1981-2015)", in Alexander von Lünen, Katherine J. Lewis, Benjamin Litherland and Pat Cullum (eds.), *Historia Ludens: The Playing Historian*, (New York: Routledge, 2020), p. 12.

¹⁵Debra Ramsey, "Brutal Games: "Call of Duty" and the Cultural Narrative of World War II", *Cinema Journal*, vol. 54: 2 (2015), pp. 95-98.

¹⁶de Groot, *Consuming History*, pp.153-154; Ramsey, "Brutal Games", p. 99.

¹⁷Ester Wright, *Rockstar Games and American History*, p.1.

¹⁸"Top countries and markets by video game revenues", *Newzoo*, <https://newzoo.com/resources/rankings/top-10-countries-by-game-revenues>.

Ludo-Narrative Dissonance

The simplified presentation of history in games is also a consequence of the *ludo-narrative dissonance* which can arise from presenting historical ‘villains’ in ‘heroic’ contexts; ludo-narrative dissonance, a term coined by video game writer and director Clint Hocking, refers to a disjunction between the written narrative of a game and the ‘player-generated’ experience created through gameplay interactions with a game’s world, and can have significant consequences for the immersion and emotive impact of a video game.¹⁹ Since the majority of narrative-focused games position the player as the story’s protagonist, players are preconditioned to expect that the protagonist, and by inference the player themselves, is the ‘hero’ of the narrative; this has contributed to many well-written and well-executed ‘player as the villain’ revelations becoming noteworthy moments within the gaming medium.²⁰ In a historical context, this narrative preconditioning can conflict with gameplay if a game’s narrative is set from the perspective of a historical figure or group popularly categorised as a ‘villain’, especially given the assumptions of ‘historical accuracy’ in popular discourse surrounding historical games. Ludo-narrative dissonance often proves a significant challenge for developers, as it places unspoken restrictions on which historical perspectives are considered acceptable by the public for depiction as playable scenarios within a game. Many portrayals of contentious historical events in games, such as the depiction of 2004’s controversial Second Battle of Fallujah in the game *Six Days in Fallujah* (2021), receive vocal public protests which often negatively impact the affected game’s sales or development; in the case of *Six Days in Fallujah*, the negative public reaction to the game’s development prompted the game’s original publisher, Konami, to withdraw their support for the title, ultimately resulting in the bankruptcy

Accessed 20 November 2023; J Clement, “Distribution of game developers worldwide as of April 2021, by region”, *Statista*, 19 August 2021, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/453785/game-developer-region-distribution-worldwide/>. Accessed 20 November 2023.

¹⁹Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, pp. 161; Frédéric Seraphine, “Ludonarrative Dissonance: Is Storytelling About Reaching Harmony?”, *Researchgate.net* (2016), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/307569310_Ludonarrative_Dissonance_Is_Storytelling_About_Reaching_Harmony. Accessed 11 December 2023.

²⁰For examples, see WhatCulture Gaming, “10 Video Games That Trick You Into Playing The Villain”, *YouTube*, 2 June 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KMURIX-ohpA>. Accessed 11 December 2023; WhatCulture Gaming, “9 Times Video Games Tricked You Into Becoming The Villain”, *YouTube*, 15 October 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aXAJBrk_yLU. Accessed 11 December 2023.

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and closure of the original development studio, Atomic Games.²¹ Situations like this create a clear, if understandable, reluctance on behalf of game developers to permit an association between players and historical atrocities within their games.²² While certain fictional gaming protagonists, such as Arthur Morgan from *Red Dead Redemption 2*, may be played in a morally 'villainous' manner thanks to the significant degree of player agency facilitated in many modern game genres, such a portrayal frequently runs counter to the game's intended narrative, and so is either restricted to specific gameplay segments, punished by in-built morality mechanics and narrative choices, or prompts real-world responses from the developers to distance themselves from controversial actions by players.²³

Playing as the villain is also complicated by the aim of video games to be 'good fun'. Video games are, fundamentally, a form of entertainment as well as an artistic medium, offering escapist experiences and power fantasies for player enjoyment; therefore, issues of real-world political controversy act as an uncomfortable distraction from these experiences.²⁴ Consequently, many games which actively facilitate the player's actions as a 'villain' are conducted in a setting or gameplay format which is demonstrably separated from reality, often occurring within fictional scenarios such as science-fiction or fantasy, or appear as features of gameplay genres, such as Grand Strategy or Role-Playing games, where player choice forms such a critical element of gameplay that player actions automatically separate in-game events from reality. As the public backlash to *Six Days in Fallujah's* development demonstrates, the consequences of alienating modern audiences by depicting history deemed unacceptably controversial can be severe, which encourages developers to portray historical narratives and player perspectives which conform to the expectations of their audience.²⁵ History may be bloody, but players want developers of historical games to ensure that their hands remain untarnished by any historical atrocities.

²¹Wesley Yin-Poole, "Six Days in Fallujah re-emerges 11 years after Konami ditched it", *Eurogamer*, 12 February 2021, <https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2021-02-11-six-days-in-fallujah-reemerges-11-years-after-konami-ditched-it>. Accessed 8 December 2023.

²²Kempshall, *The First World War in Computer Games*, pp. 4-6.

²³Locke, "You Are A True Progressive", pp. 174-188; Michael James Heron & Pauline Helen Belford, "Do you Feel Like a Hero Yet?: Externalized Morality in Video Games", *Journal of Games Criticism*, vol. 1:2 (2014). Consulted online: <https://gamescriticism.org/2023/07/24/do-you-feel-like-a-hero-yet-externalised-morality-in-video-games/>. Accessed 14 December 2023.

²⁴Chapman and Linderoth, "Exploring the Limits of Play", pp. 137-140.

²⁵Yin-Poole, "Six Days in Fallujah re-emerges 11 years after Konami ditched it".

Naturally, there are exceptions, and some games have successfully presented revisionist narratives in their depictions of history and challenged ideas of ‘heroes’ and ‘villains’; for example, *Assassin’s Creed: Valhalla* (2020), whose original announcement trailer expressly highlighted its contrast to the traditional, popular characterisation of the Vikings by depicting the game’s protagonist, Eivor, acting in direct opposition to a narrator, ultimately revealed as King Alfred ‘the Great’, who describes the Vikings in terms symbolic of their traditionally villainous media image.²⁶ Yet such revisionist attitudes also come with caveats and flaws as consequences of the gaming medium. Games, as Adam Chapman and Jonas Linderoth note, have a ‘moral obligation’ to avoid causing offence to the survivors of historical atrocities or ‘those whose identities are deeply linked with the victims of such experiences’.²⁷ As such, games experience greater difficulty in presenting more nuanced depictions of historical ‘villains’ whose actions are within, or strongly linked to, living memory.²⁸ In Chris Kempshall’s words, ‘time has removed the shock value from such ancient conflicts’, enabling older historical periods to be safely explored in the gaming medium despite the consequent loss of source material, whereas ‘a form of self-censorship is required’ to off-set the controversy of more recent, better documented history with its presentation in video games.²⁹ Therefore, games are only permitted to present ‘villainous’ historical figures as playable perspectives in ancient conflicts which players may struggle to emotionally identify with, or after imposing omissions, anachronisms or other problematic historiographical phenomena to enable these groups to become acceptable within a gameplay context.³⁰

The combination of these factors – established history, media tradition, business influences, ludo-narrative dissonance, and norms of playing as heroes – makes playing with conventional ideas of a historical ‘villain’ challenging within video games. Yet only by challenging popular understandings of historical conflicts through more nuanced and empathetic depictions in the media can we attempt to understand the decisions and experiences of their participants. Engaging with historical conflicts from the perspective of their narrative ‘villains’ is a key element of this process.

Battlefield V & the German Problem of Second World War Games

²⁶Assassin’s Creed UK, “Assassin’s Creed Valhalla: Cinematic World Premier Trailer”, YouTube, 30 April 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kjsxl0IXWsA>. Accessed 8 December 2023.

²⁷Chapman and Linderoth, “Exploring the Limits of Play”, p. 140.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Kempshall, *The First World War in Computer Games*, pp. 4-6.

³⁰Margaret MacMillan, *War: How Conflict Shaped Us*, (London: Profile Books, 2020), pp. 2-3; Chapman and Jonas Linderoth, “Exploring the Limits of Play”, pp. 147-149; Kempshall, *The First World War in Computer Games*, pp. 4-6 & pp. 60-70.

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The reluctance of video game developers to directly associate players with controversial history makes DICE and Electronic Arts’ First-Person Shooter game, *Battlefield V* (2018), all the more remarkable for the simple fact of its inclusion of a narrative-focused campaign, entitled *The Last Tiger*, set from the German perspective in WWII, a historical context synonymous with villainy.



Figure 1: Promotional artwork for Battlefield V – The Last Tiger.³¹

The player is shown as the commander of a German Tiger tank in the final months of the war, defending an unnamed city against the advancing Americans and in the story’s opening cinematic, the central characters of *The Last Tiger* pass a line of German prisoners, who are identified as deserters; meanwhile, the German officer guarding these prisoners salutes the player character as they pass.³² Later, at the end of the first act, the Tiger crew are forced to conceal themselves from Allied aircraft and one crewmember is required to leave the safety of the tank in order to scout ahead on foot. After a short dialogue, in which one of the crew – the fanatical youth, Schröder, who acts as the spokesperson of Nazi ideology throughout the story – advocates the selection of a young conscript, Hartmann; according to Schröder, all the other members of the crew are too valuable to risk, whereas the frightened Hartmann is ‘damaged’ and ‘expendable’. With great reluctance, Hartmann obeys his orders and leaves the tank, but is quickly lost from view; while the rest of the crew express

³¹*Battlefield V – The Last Tiger* (EA DICE, 2018). Xbox, PlayStation, and PC.

³²Video game cinematics are non-interactive film-like sequences created within a game. They are commonly used to depict complex action or narrative sequences without requiring player in-put.

concern for their comrade, Schröder immediately brands him a deserter. These separate narrative strands converge at the end of the second act when, in another cinematic, the eponymous tank passes the prisoners seen in the introduction being hanged from lampposts by the same officer, who again proudly salutes the player character. The tank then stops to illuminate the missing crewman, Hartmann, who has also been hanged as a deserter. This incident expressly confronts the tank crew, and by consequence the player, with the role they have played in supporting the actions of the Nazi regime, which ultimately causes the surviving crewmen, with the exception of the fanatical Schröder, to abandon the Nazi cause in the story's climax; after a final cinematic in which Schröder shoots his fellow crewmembers, including the player protagonist, for their refusal to fight to the death on the Nazis' behalf, the game highlights the predicament of the German military by describing the oath of loyalty under which its members were obliged to fight for Hitler's regime.³³

The Last Tiger, and its intentions to portray a German narrative which does not attempt to isolate the protagonist from the actions of the Nazi regime, stand in direct contrast to various previous depictions of the German experience in the Second World War. In several German-perspective narratives seen in previous Second World War films, the German protagonist is explicitly positioned in opposition to the actions and views of the Nazi regime, thus enabling the audience to empathise with them without supporting Hitler and his followers. In the fictional *The Eagle Has Landed* (1976), the German protagonist Colonel Steiner, played by Michael Caine, is punished for attempting to aid the escape of a young Jewish girl from SS captivity, while his superior Colonel Radl, played by Robert Duvall, is deceived by Heinrich Himmler, played by Donald Pleasance, into believing that the operation which forms the film's central plot was officially authorised.³⁴ Meanwhile, the biographical film *Valkyrie* (2008) depicts the attempts of the German military resistance led by Colonel Von Stauffenburg, played by Tom Cruise, to assassinate Hitler and overthrow the Nazi regime, thereby expressly pitting the central cast against Hitler and his supporters.³⁵ In each of these instances, the principle German characters are shown in overt contrast to the agents of the Nazi Party, acting either as their unwilling or misled pawns or in deliberate opposition to Hitler's government, thus enabling the writers of these narratives to create sympathetic characters while keeping the Nazis in the overall 'villain' role. While the writers of *The Last Tiger* stressed that their German player character was not a Nazi, the central premises of complicity and disillusionment precluded the employment of similar narrative devices to those featured in the likes of *The Eagle Has Landed* or *Valkyrie*, as *The Last Tiger's* narrative deliberately intends to associate the player with the actions of the Nazi regime and thereby actively confront players'

³³*Battlefield V – The Last Tiger*.

³⁴*The Eagle Has Landed*, directed by John Sturges (1976, ITC Entertainment; DVD).

³⁵*Valkyrie*, directed by Bryan Singer (2008, United Artists; DVD).

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understanding of the German experience in the Second World War.³⁶ Instead, *The Last Tiger* may be viewed as a gaming representation of the revisionist narrative in which the Germans in the Second World War are framed as victims of their own government, actively highlighting a relationship with the Nazi regime which illustrates the exploitation experienced by ordinary Germans during the war.³⁷ This interpretation highlights the significance of the reference to the German military’s oath of loyalty at the conclusion of *The Last Tiger*, the influence of which otherwise goes unacknowledged within the game.

The Last Tiger is not without faults, some of which greatly restrict the game’s ability to achieve its narrative objectives. The game incorporates some prominent anachronisms – the game features no expressly Nazi symbols, such as swastikas, for instance – although many of these are common occurrences in Second World War-set games or are readily attributable to modern political sensitivities which might impact upon game sales.³⁸ Other flaws can similarly be ascribed as symptoms of cultural influence within game development: *The Last Tiger* shares prominent parallels with the German TV mini-series *Generation War* (2013), which depicts the experiences of a group of German youths drawn into various roles on the Eastern Front, and with David Ayer’s *Fury* (2014), the war film, starring Brad Pitt, about the eponymous American tank and its crew, while *The Last Tiger*’s development was directly inspired by the popularity of a similar tank-focused story in *Battlefield 1* (2016).³⁹

³⁶Andy Chalk, “Battlefield 5’s German campaign mission is ‘not a hero story’”, *PC Gamer*, 18 October 2018, <https://www.pcgamer.com/battlefield-5s-german-campaign-mission-is-not-a-hero-story/>. Accessed 8 December 2023; Wesley Yin-Poole, “The Battlefield 5 campaign lets you play the German perspective but ‘it’s not a hero story’, insists DICE”, *Eurogamer*, 18 October 2018, <https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2018-10-18-the-battlefield-5-campaign-lets-you-play-as-the-nazis-but-its-not-a-hero-story-insists-dice>. Accessed 8 December 2023.

³⁷Robert G. Moeller, “Germans as Victims?: Thoughts on a Post-Cold War History of World War II’s Legacies”, *History and Memory*, vol. 17:1-2 (2005), pp. 145-195; Bill Niven, ‘Generation War and Post-Didactic Memory: the Nazi past in contemporary Germany’, in Finney, *Remembering the Second World War*, pp. 30-42.

³⁸Chapman and Linderoth, “Exploring the Limits of Play”, pp. 147-149; “Germany lifts total ban on Nazi symbols in video games”, *BBC News*, 10 August 2018, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-45142651>. Accessed 8 December 2023.

³⁹*Generation War*, directed by Philipp Kadelbach, broadcast 17 - 20 March 2013 on ZDF, DVD; *Fury*, directed by David Ayer (2014, Columbia Pictures; DVD); Yin-Poole, “The Battlefield 5 campaign lets you play the German perspective but ‘it’s not a hero story’”.

Significantly, *The Last Tiger* is severely undermined as a narrative experience by the very game to which it belongs. *Battlefield V* is primarily a multiplayer game, released across multiple gaming platforms within a triple-A 'blockbuster' franchise, with an intended emphasis on those features which facilitate multiplayer gameplay, attract mass audiences and, crucially, generate profit; *Battlefield V*'s publisher, Electronic Arts, alleged that the redistribution of resources for the development of the game's single-player content, which includes *The Last Tiger*, instead of planned multiplayer modes was a reason for *Battlefield V*'s failure to meet initial sales targets upon release.⁴⁰ Consequently, the single-player, narrative-driven aspects of *Battlefield V* comprise only a small portion of the game's overall content, forcing the game to convey the salient moments of each individual narrative through short cinematic sequences which bookend the three gameplay sections within each story. These cinematics collectively total barely twenty minutes of content for each story, which stands in stark contrast to other narrative-driven gaming experiences; narrative-driven Role-Playing games, for instance, can require ten to twenty hours, and sometimes longer, to complete.⁴¹ This short duration severely restricts the depth and complexity with which *The Last Tiger* can explore its chosen themes. Moreover, the conveyance of the narrative through passive cinematic sequences removes any capacity for player agency which could actively affect the story. In the case of *The Last Tiger*, where the story intentionally carries undertones of complicity between the player and the Nazi cause, this constitutes a significant weakness in the game's attempts to elicit an emotional response from the player audience, thereby limiting the efficacy of its intended narrative.

However, the greatest hurdle which *The Last Tiger* faces is its subject matter. The complex identity of the Germans in the Second World War makes any playable portrayal of them in a game context inherently controversial, regardless of censorship of Nazi symbols, thereby restricting the potential form and scope of such representation to minimise its possible negative impact.⁴² The mere fact that the developers of *The Last Tiger* felt the need to clarify that the story's German protagonist

⁴⁰Stephany Nunneley, "Battlefield V sales didn't meet expectations during Q3, says EA", VG24/7, 5 February 2019, <https://www.vg247.com/2019/02/05/battlefield-5-sales-didnt-meet-expectations/>. Accessed 8 December 2023.

⁴¹Brad R. Edwards, "Are Video Games Getting Shorter?", *Make Use Of*, 7 June 2023, <https://www.makeuseof.com/are-video-games-getting-shorter/>. Accessed 11 December 2023; "What is the ideal length of a video game single-player campaign?", *Netivist*, <https://netivist.org/debate/video-game-length-single-player-campaign>. Accessed 11 December 2023.

⁴²Chapman and Linderoth, "Exploring the Limits of Play", pp. 147-149; Kempshall, *The First World War in Computer Games*, pp. 4-6.

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was not a Nazi underlines this problematic historiographical identity.⁴³ As long as 'Germans' are historically equated with 'Nazis' and vice versa, any examination of the German experiences in the context of a Second World War game will be fundamentally compromised.

Commanding the Narrative of the First World War

As in the case of the German experience of the Second World War, Britain's cultural narrative of the First World War has struggled for years to escape from the shadow of its mythologised commemorative and popular cultural history, despite repeated reassessment by the academic community.⁴⁴ In 2014, the UK's Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, controversially criticised the manner in which the First World War was being taught, which the tabloid newspaper *The Daily Mail* supported by reporting that 'teachers should stop showing *Blackadder* to children learning about the First World War'.⁴⁵ Although numerous teachers attempted to respond, their comments were largely sidelined by the mainstream news media.⁴⁶ The popular narrative of the First World War, like that of the Second World War, is inherently politicised, and control over its interpretation is a sensitive issue when perceived to be disrespectful to the sacrifices seen in that conflict.⁴⁷

This popular narrative is, in some respects, a product of hindsight. In the aftermath of the Second World War, whose narrative is dominated by mobile warfare and a clear antagonist in the form of Nazi Germany, the bloody struggle to break the stalemate of the First World War's trenches has been highlighted in severe contrast or framed as a warning or prologue for the later conflict. Moreover, thanks to the historical foreknowledge provided by the outbreak of the Second World War, the extraordinary casualties seen in the earlier conflict are perceived as all the more tragic and futile to modern audiences; according to Catriona Pennel, the words most

⁴³Yin-Poole, "The Battlefield 5 campaign lets you play the German perspective but 'it's not a hero story'".

⁴⁴For examples, see Ian Beckett, Timothy Bowman & Mark Connelly, *The British Army & the First World War*, (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2017); Hanna, *The Great War on the Small Screen*.

⁴⁵Jason Groves, "History dons back Gove over ban *Blackadder*: Great War comedy is not documentary for schools, they argue", *The Daily Mail*, 4 January 2014, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2533619/History-dons-Gove-ban-Blackadder-Great-War-comedy-not-documentary-schools-argue.html>. Accessed 28 February 2024.

⁴⁶Catriona Pennel, "On the frontlines of teaching the history of the First World War", *Teaching History*, vol. 155 (2014), p. 34.

⁴⁷Hanna, *The Great War on the Small Screen*, pp. 7-29; Kempshall, *The First World War in Computer Games*, pp. 4-6.

associated with the First World War by the British public in 2014 were “‘trenches”, “death” and “loss of life””.⁴⁸ One crystallisation of this popular conceptualisation of the First World War is the ‘lions led by donkeys’ myth, which has exerted a powerful influence over British remembrance culture, following the efforts of veterans to rationalise the war’s unprecedented carnage in its aftermath by identifying someone to blame, ultimately manifesting in demands to hold the commanding generals that were criticised in the memoirs of participants accountable for the death-toll of the conflict.⁴⁹

Film and television have played a critical role in promoting this understanding of the First World War, emphasising the extraordinary casualties of its battles and the role of the commanding officers in causing them. Among the most famous, and therein most enduring, depictions of this interpretation of history comes from the British situation-comedy *Blackadder Goes Forth* (BBC, 1989), which, as previously mentioned, became a focal point of controversy regarding how that war is perceived in the modern day.⁵⁰ Across the series’ six-episode run, the dynamic between the eponymous Captain Blackadder, played by Rowan Atkinson, and his commanding officer, General Melchett, played by Stephen Fry, routinely forms the focal point of each episode as Blackadder’s comically desperate efforts to escape the trenches come into conflict with Melchett’s delusional strategies, which frequently threaten to send Blackadder and his subordinates to their certain deaths. In the series’ final episode, this dynamic is additionally manifested through the inclusion of Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, played by Geoffrey Palmer, a principal figurehead of the ‘lions led by donkeys’ myth.⁵¹ In the episode, Blackadder calls Haig in a final attempt to escape the trenches before ‘going over the top’; Haig answers while surveying a scale model covered with miniature figures and, as they talk, casually knocks over these figures using a dustpan and brush to clear them away, directly symbolising his causal disinterest in the hundreds of soldiers about to advance to their deaths at his command.⁵² This symbolism is further signalled when Haig picks up and contemplates one of these discarded figures as he consents to Blackadder’s request, thereby inferring the title

⁴⁸Belinda Davis, “Experience, Identity, and Memory: The Legacy of World War I”, *The Journal of Modern History*, vol. 75:1 (2003), p. 111; Kempshall, *The First World War in Computer Games*, pp. 18-21; Pennel, “On the frontlines”, p. 34.

⁴⁹Hanna, *The Great War on the Small Screen*, pp. 89-94.

⁵⁰*Blackadder Goes Forth*; Hanna, *The Great War on the Small Screen*, pp. 22-24; Pennel, “On the frontlines”, p. 34.

⁵¹*Blackadder Goes Forth*, “Goodbyeee”, written by Richard Curtis and Ben Elton, broadcast 2 November 1989 on BBC1, DVD; Hanna, *The Great War on the Small Screen*, pp. 89-100.

⁵²*Blackadder Goes Forth*, “Goodbyeee”; Hanna, *The Great War on the Small Screen*, p. 90.

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character’s supposed salvation and emphasising the subsequent tragedy when Haig’s plan proves useless.⁵³

Even British science-fiction has contributed to the presentation of the First World War’s commanders as villains. In the 1969 ten-part *Doctor Who* serial, *The War Games*, the Doctor, played by Patrick Troughton, arrives with his companions at what they believe is the Western Front and are summarily tried as spies by the callous British commander, General Smythe, played by Noel Coleman.⁵⁴ However, they soon discover that Smythe and his German counterpart are members of an alien race using brainwashed soldiers from conflicts throughout human history – including the First World War and the American Civil War – to conduct the eponymous war games in simulations of these same conflicts, and therein test Humanity’s suitability as a tool of galactic conquest.⁵⁵ Although the historical setting is soon subsumed by the broader science-fiction plot, the initial episodes of the serial attempt to rationalise the experience of the First World War by presenting it in the context of a military hierarchy subservient to the machinations of a (literally) inhuman commander, who views their subordinates only as disposable pieces in a violent contest played directly against their opposite number.⁵⁶

A more recent and nuanced depiction of the struggle faced by these commanding officers, battling the imperative of winning the war against the desire to preserve the lives of their soldiers, is presented by Colonel Mackenzie, played by Benedict Cumberbatch, in Sam Mendez’ Oscar-winning film, *1917* (2020).⁵⁷ The film’s plot revolves around two corporals, Blake, played by Dean-Charles Chapman, and Schofield, played by George Mackay, who are dispatched with a message for Colonel Mackenzie, who has advanced his battalion into No Man’s Land unaware that the

⁵³*Blackadder Goes Forth*, “Goodbyeee”.

⁵⁴*Doctor Who*, “The War Games – Episode One”, written by Terrance Dicks and Malcom Hulke, broadcast 19 April 1969 on BBC1. Consulted online:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/p00v54p8/doctor-who-19631996-season-6-the-war-games-episode-1?seriesId=p00krpg4>. Accessed 10 November 2023.

⁵⁵ *Doctor Who*, “The War Games – Episode Three”, written by Terrance Dicks and Malcom Hulke, broadcast 3 May 1969 on BBC1. Consulted online:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/p00v54rs/doctor-who-19631996-season-6-the-war-games-episode-3>. Accessed 10 November 2023; *Doctor Who*, “The War Games – Episode Eight”, written by Terrance Dicks and Malcom Hulke, broadcast 7

June 1969 on BBC1. Consulted online:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/p00v550n/doctor-who-19631996-season-6-the-war-games-episode-8?seriesId=p00krpg4&page=2>. Accessed 10 November 2023.

⁵⁶*Doctor Who*, “The War Games – Episode Three”.

⁵⁷*1917*, directed by Sam Mendez (2020, Universal Pictures; DVD).

Germans have withdrawn to new, heavily fortified defences; if Blake and Schofield fail to warn him, Mackenzie's men – including Blake's brother – will be massacred as they attack the Germans' new positions. After many tribulations, Schofield finally reaches Mackenzie just as his troops begin their assault; after belligerently dismissing Schofield's message, believing that his commanders are hesitating on the cusp of victory, Mackenzie grudgingly reads the message and, with visible reluctance, calls off his attack. While the order is disseminated, Mackenzie indicates the reason for his bullish aggression: the hope that *this time* the enemy would be defeated. As he tells Schofield, 'hope is a dangerous thing', for he understands that the respite Schofield's message has brought is fleeting, and he will inevitably be given new orders to attack in the coming days. In his eyes, 'there is only one way this war ends: last man standing'.⁵⁸ Significantly, however, Mackenzie is shown in marked contrast to, for instance, General Melchett, as he visibly recognises the cost of his decisions and, although believing himself justified, cancels his attack before casualties rise.

History versus Memory in The Great War

In each of these examples, the role of the commanding officer is emphasised in dictating the casualties of the First World War's battles, framing them in the cultural context of the 'villain' created by the mythologised narrative of the conflict. Alongside these continuations of the cultural interpretation of the war, video games have developed their own depictions of the conflict, explored in detail by Kempshall, which have served to both challenge and support the perspectives offered by other media.⁵⁹ Among the most recent contributions by the gaming medium is *The Great War: Western Front* (2023), a PC strategy game developed by Petroglyph Games in collaboration with the UK's Imperial War Museums.⁶⁰ Combining turn-based strategic gameplay on a wider 'theatre' view of the Western Front with focused, 'real-time' tactical battles, *The Great War* challenges players to choose whether to direct the war as the Allied Nations of France, the British Empire and Commonwealth countries, and the United States, or as the Central Powers – which, given the focus on the Western Front, means Germany alone – and guide their chosen faction to victory.⁶¹

Thanks to Petroglyph's collaboration with the Imperial War Museums, *The Great War* reflects its history in every facet of its design, including its gameplay. Unlike other

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹Kempshall, *The First World War in Computer Games*.

⁶⁰*The Great War: Western Front*, (Petroglyph Games, 2023). Published by Frontier Foundry, PC; Petroglyph Games, *The Great War: Western Front – Digital Field Guide* (2023), p. 1.

⁶¹*The Great War: Western Front; Digital Field Guide*, pp. 2-4 & p. 9; *The Great War: Western Front*, "Relive Or Redefine History in The Great War: Western Front – Available Now", *Steam*, developer update, 30 March 2023.

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strategy games, players of *The Great War* cannot conquer entire continents in a matter of in-game months, painting the map in the colour of their faction; instead, players must painstakingly fight for every inch of ground, launching multiple successful attacks in order to secure a single region on the game’s strategic ‘theatre’ map, on which units are displayed like tokens on a general’s map table.⁶²



Figure 2: Strategic ‘theatre’ gameplay view in *The Great War: Western Front*.⁶³

The player may assume direct control over battles in *The Great War*, conducting them in two stages: a pre-battle stage, in which the player may position as many trenches, troops and other military assets – such as barbed wire, weapon emplacements and artillery batteries – as they have the resources to support; and a ‘real-time’ battle phase, in which the player directs their forces to either attack or defend key objectives on the map, possession of which will swing the outcome of the battle in favour of the side which controls them.⁶⁴ Both phases are conducted from a high, overlooking viewpoint – as though watching the battle unfold from an aircraft overhead – and the

⁶²*The Great War: Western Front*; *The Great War: Western Front*, “Gameplay Guide: Strategy & Tactics”, Steam, developer update, 11 April 2023; Phil Savage, “The Great War: Western Front is an RTS you’ll win by inches, not miles”, *PC Gamer*, 21 September 2022, <https://www.pcgamer.com/the-great-war-western-front-is-an-rts-youll-win-by-inches-not-miles/>. Accessed 14 November 2023.

⁶³ *The Great War: Western Front*.

⁶⁴*The Great War: Western Front*; *Digital Field Guide*, p. 2.

player's control over their units is restricted to simple instructions such as point-to-point movement and generic attack orders, mimicking the limited tactical control generals have over units in the heat of battle.

As with their historical counterparts, battles in *The Great War* are bloody affairs. Upon receiving attack orders, soldiers will emerge from their trenches and advance across No Man's Land. As players quickly discover, many of their units will be destroyed by enemy fire long before they reach the enemy's trenches, and those that do will usually be too depleted to fight effectively against the undamaged units awaiting them. Therefore, players will research and employ tactical assets such as artillery barrages, tanks and undermining to attempt to 'soften up' the enemy ahead of or alongside an infantry assault, and the game's tutorial teaches players to utilise these assets. Even with this support, losses will continue to mount with remorseless inevitability, forcing players to decide whether to continue sending troops across No Man's Land in the hope of achieving their objectives, or to spare their forces needless casualties and concede the battle.⁶⁵ In the heat of the moment, many players may find themselves deciding that the perceived tactical gain will be worth the losses and continue fighting, often resulting in only minor gains – if any – and leaving the battlefield littered with the bodies of fallen soldiers.

This is the mentality which the cultural legacy of the war frames as the 'villainous' trait of the conflict's generals. With the benefit of hindsight provided by more than a century's separation from events, the assumption that the generals were blind to the human cost of their decisions appears convincing to modern eyes coloured by culturally conditioned beliefs about the First World War's conduct. Yet it is a scenario that has been replicated within the digital confines of *The Great War* for at least one player, who – crucially – was shocked to realise that they had unwittingly assumed the role which the popular narrative of the First World War has condemned.⁶⁶ Moreover, the game's developers have not expressed an intention to create a scenario in which players would find themselves acting out the 'lions led by donkeys' myth; simply by collaborating with the Imperial War Museums to ensure that every possible element of gameplay was authentic to the history of the war, Petroglyph created the conditions within *The Great War* for players to become the 'villain' of the popular historical narrative.⁶⁷

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶Alice Newcombe-Beill, "A WWI strategy game turned me into Benedict Cumberbatch", *Polygon*, 10 April 2023, <https://www.polygon.com/platform/amp/23670056/the-great-war-western-front-ww1-rtts-benedict-cumberbatch>. Accessed 14 November 2023.

⁶⁷*Digital Field Guide*, p. 1.

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Rather than contributing to the inherent condemnation of this strategy, *The Great War* instead incorporates it into its presentation of the First World War.⁶⁸ While players may successfully conclude campaigns and win the war by capturing the enemy faction’s headquarters region – for instance, Paris as the Allies’ HQ – this strategy is extraordinarily difficult to achieve within the parameters of the game: achievement data from the game platform, Steam, indicates that (at time of writing) only 1.7 per cent of players had achieved victory in a campaign by successfully capturing the enemy HQ.⁶⁹ Instead, *The Great War*’s campaigns feature a unique secondary mechanic: ‘National Will’, a numerical system effected by battles and other in-game events, which reflects the two opposing factions’ overall desire to prosecute the war. Within the game, victories will raise ‘National Will’, while defeats or sustained heavy casualties will lower it, and if a faction’s ‘National Will’ falls to zero that side will concede the war.⁷⁰ When one compares the percentage of players who have successfully captured an enemy HQ region to the total percentage of players who have successfully completed a campaign – 17.2 per cent as the Allies and 18.3 per cent as the Central Powers, at the time of writing – it is clear that the majority of players achieve victory in *The Great War*’s campaign mode by exhausting their opponent’s ‘National Will’.⁷¹ This more closely reflects the history of the war as a battle of attrition between the opposing sides, and as such creates a more representative experience and more nuanced insight into the challenges presented to the First World War’s commanding officers.

However, because the game does not explicitly connect the player’s actions to the ‘lions led by donkeys’ myth, *The Great War* relies on players identifying this connection for themselves, limiting the game’s overall exploration of this narrative but strengthening its emotional impact once an individual recognises the implications of their actions within the game.⁷² This, in turn, encourages players to think critically about the historical narrative of the First World War, highlighting the value of directly participating in history through video games to gain a more resonant understanding of historical events.

⁶⁸Kempshall, *The First World War in Computer Games*, pp. 60-70.

⁶⁹*Digital Field Guide*, p. 4; *The Great War: Western Front*, “Global Achievements”, Steam, <https://steamcommunity.com/stats/2109370/achievements>. Accessed 8 December 2023.

⁷⁰*The Great War: Western Front; Digital Field Guide*, p. 4; “Gameplay Guide: Strategy & Tactics”.

⁷¹*The Great War: Western Front*, “Global Achievements”.

⁷²Newcombe-Beill, “A WWI strategy game turned me into Benedict Cumberbatch”.

Conclusion

Between these two examples – depictions of the Germans in the Second World War and the generals in the First – we can identify some crucial factors in the presentation of historical ‘villains’ within games and identify important considerations for assessing the interaction of video games with history in more general terms. Firstly, modern influences play significant roles in shaping the presentation of history in video games. Historical games do not exist in isolation, either within popular culture or within society as a whole; games serve as representations of contemporary attitudes as well as interpretations of historical sources. Consequently, the effect of these wider influences must be assessed as part of a game’s interpretation of history to identify and, if necessary, separate the modern viewpoints and manipulations of the historical subject matter.

Secondly, the ‘villainous’ identities of historical figures or groups are frequently constructed or reinforced in hindsight, leading to politicised memories of events which can make nuanced engagement with the associated history a significant, sometimes insurmountable, challenge within the medium of video games. In particular, the issue of participant association within gaming forces developers to isolate players from the worst historical controversies, thereby constraining a game’s ability to engage with associated historical subjects to avoid causing offense to affected communities.

Finally, the manner of interaction with history in the context of a video game, particularly with regards to constructs of historical villains’, is crucial. Engagement with history in the gaming medium relies on the player developing an emotional connection with the subject matter, and where this engagement is restricted by gameplay considerations or censorship, the emotional impact of the game is diluted. Therefore, each historical game should be examined on an individual basis to assess its unique characteristics as a means of presenting its particular historical subject(s), which will subsequently enable a broader identification of those games or genres least suited to engaging with history, or of those historical subjects better suited to exploration by media like film and television.

The inherent fascination with conflict in video games is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future, although societal attitudes to engagement with historical conflicts can and have changed over time. Therefore, the depiction in video games of those figures framed as ‘villains’ in the popular narrative of historical conflicts can serve as a useful indicator of changing modern attitudes to history. As such, historians have an obligation to engage with and examine the presentation of historical ‘villains’ in video games, despite their often-imperfect presentation of history, to explore the concept of history in modern society and the willingness of the gaming industry to depict – on

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occasion – historical subjects which are, in the words of a *Battlefield V* developer, ‘not a hero story’.⁷³

⁷³Yin-Poole, “The Battlefield 5 campaign lets you play the German perspective but ‘it’s not a hero story””.